

WAYWARD REFUSALS

2024 MA Curatorial Practice



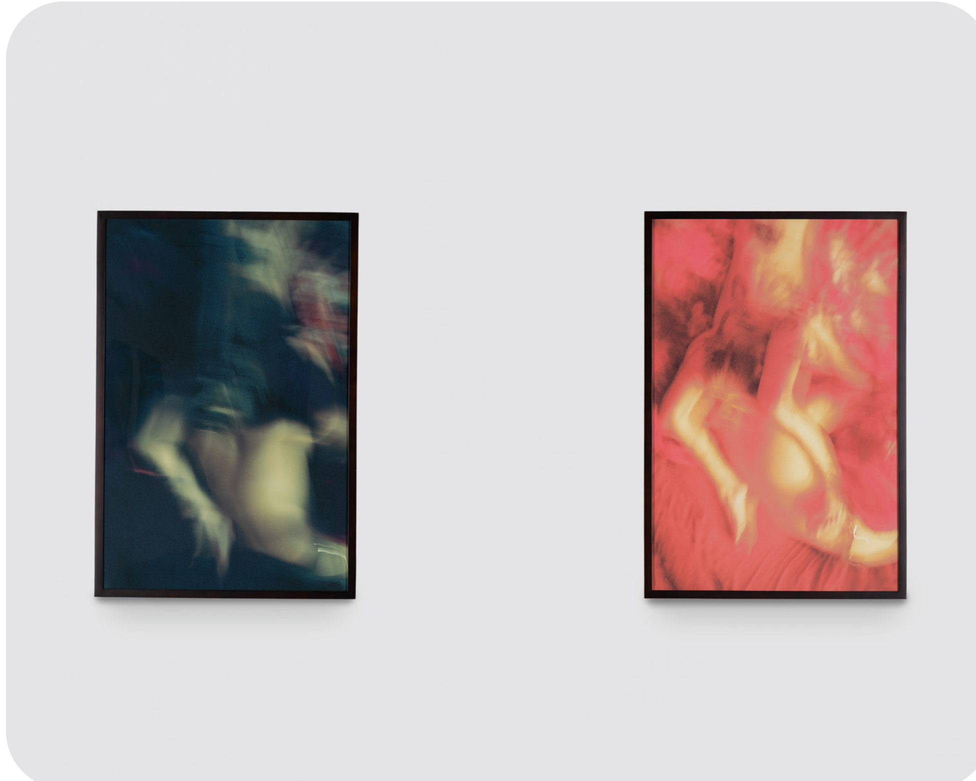
Wayward Refusals
Wayward Refusals explores the radical creativity that results from experiences of oppression, marginalization, rejection, and non-belonging. Including painting, sculpture, video, photography, collage and NFT, this exhibition highlights how conscious acts of refusal by minoritarian subjects can become sources of disorderly power that dismantle the status quo. These artists develop world-making actions despite the ever-present threats of social, legal and psychological punishments in life under capitalism. They refused to hide, to blend into a crowd, or to conform to norms. Together, their works embody what Saidiya Hartman describes as "wayward experiments," celebrating practices of refusal that forefront alternative ways of living. They demonstrate how it is possible to not only survive but thrive within the strangely liberating realms of vulnerability, failure, ambiguity, and excess. We hope that the liminal gatherings this exhibition brings together will leave enduring marks. Wayward Refusals invites us all to think through our own practices of denial, forging community and unlocking more life in the process.
The exhibition is curated by: Ashley Ascencio, Chenyang Nie, Hattie Schultz, Linna Wang, Yishan Xin, Alice Zhao, Hang Zhang.
Lucy Black
Cyshimi
Katinka Huang
Young Joon Kwak
Julia Mata
Coyote Park
RUTH
Toni Smalls
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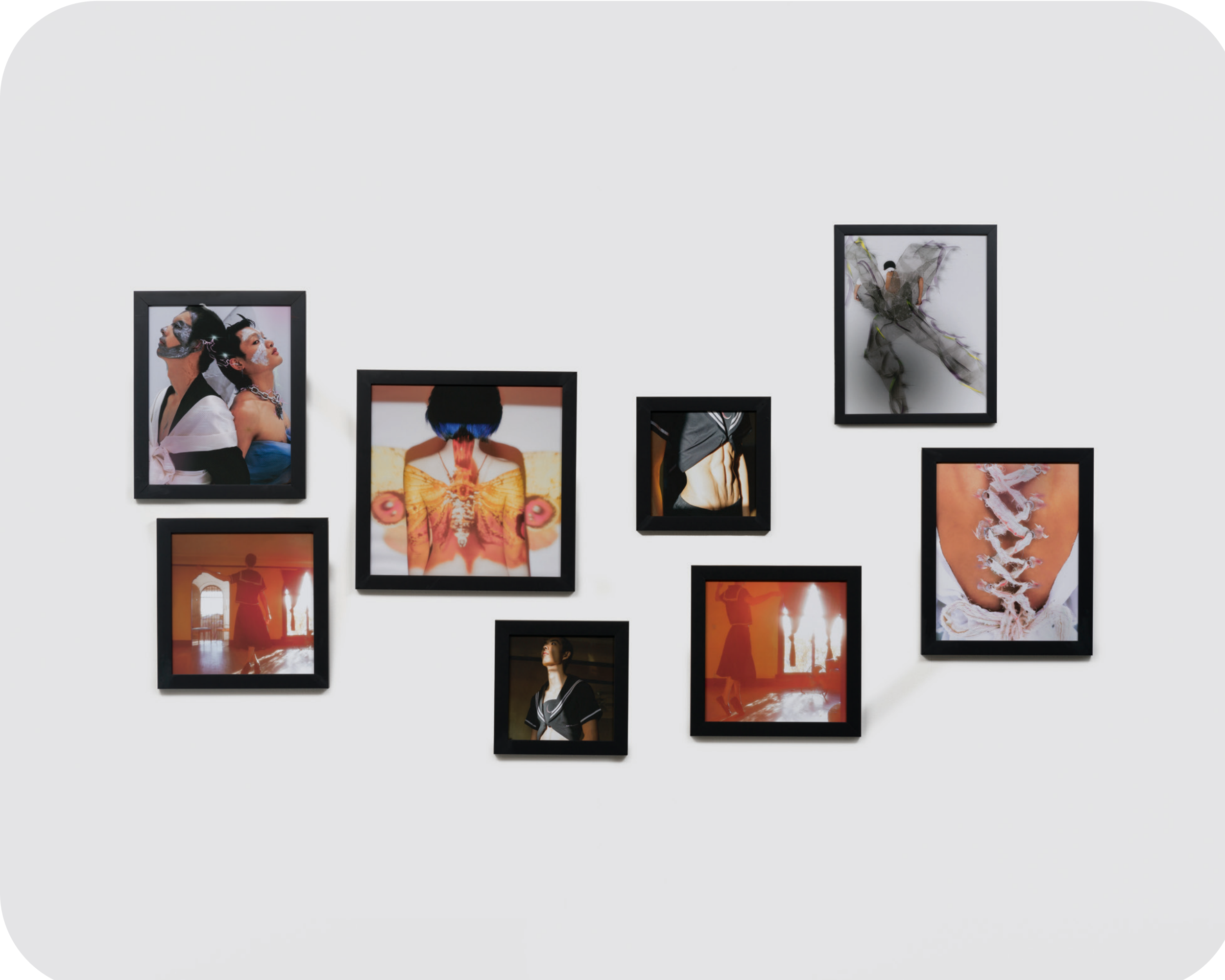








RISK WORK
MINOR FEELINGS
CATHY PARK HONG
Cyshimi
Treasure Knots, 2022
NFT
Cyshimi
Deepest Dive, 2022
NFT

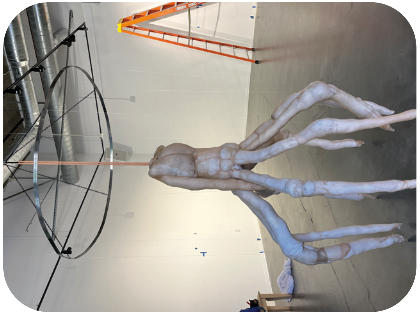



MEDICAL AUTHORITIES
KNOW THIS ONE IS
SUPERIOR_
ALL FENCES MUST BE
PAINTED WHITE
BAND
SUPERBOARD
DRAWN TO EXCESS












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The goal of generating community for those experiencing feelings of non-belonging or marginalization was the first decision made by the 2024 MA Curatorial cohort in conceptualizing what would become *Wayward Refusals*. Exploring the radical creativity that can emerge out of oppression, rejection, and isolation felt like a world-making practice in itself. This, together with the diverse backgrounds of the curatorial team enriches the conversations on practices of refusal that forefront alternative ways of living. Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's "wayward experiments," it was agreed upon that encouraging others to think through their own practices of refusal was both timely and necessary.

This exhibition came into being during an especially violent moment in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and, as this catalogue goes to press, we are still witnessing an ongoing humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by U.S. imperialism and neoliberal ideology. This new stage in the war has raised tensions in academic discourse, and has dramatically limited access to information and freedom of political expression on college campuses, including USC. In honoring the political values and activist themes of *Wayward Refusals*, a fundraiser was held at the opening reception, collecting donations for Doctors Without Borders to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza. Projects like Wayward Refusals wouldn't be possible without the voices of our global community, who inspire and fuel the work of the featured artists.

In its argument for fabulating new realities, *Wayward Refusals* continues to generate new creative action, present among the artists, curators, USC

Foreword

community, and beyond. The challenge of developing world-making actions despite the ever-present threats of social, legal, and psychological punishments in life under capitalism is an ongoing endeavor. To have queer kinship emerge from this rubble is perhaps what makes *Wayward Refusals* especially vibrant and resonant.

Young Joon Kwak
Surveillance Mirror Vaginis III, 2020
Fiberglass resin, acrylic surveillance mirror, dirt, rocks, silver leaf, polystyrene
65 x 40 x 13.5 in. (165 x 102 x 34 cm)





Ashley

We as a cohort chose two of Young Joon Kwak's pieces as anchor points for our show, *Circle Dance of the Divine Queer Futures* (2022) and *Surveillance Mirror Vaginis III* (2020). The first features hands holding one another in a circle and represents marginalized people supporting one another. The hands are casts from Kwak's friends' hands and their energies together to create a future. *Surveillance Mirror Vaginis III* reflects the surveillance of marginalized bodies, especially those of LGBTQ+ people and women. Kwak was thinking about the surveillance and rigid classification of gender and the panic surrounding genitals. They wanted to create something non-threatening with a touch of humor, intuitive and witchy.

Yishan
Kwak suggests that there could be two ways of hanging *Surveillance Mirror Vaginis III*: either vertically or horizontally. Opting to position it vertically as the entry piece rather than horizontally is a potent symbolic gesture that challenges conventional perceptions. This choice goes beyond mere visual curiosity, which a horizontal, eye-like presentation might primarily evoke from afar, heightening the theme of surveillance. Instead, the vertical alignment reimagines the often-objectified depiction of female genitalia, turning it instead into a reflective surface. This shift in focus reverses the gaze and invites the audience to view the body as a site of active agency, rather than as a marker reinforcing gender binaries. Here, the work symbolizes resistance against surveillance, scrutiny, and the policing of bodies and identities, echoing the exhibition's broader discourse on the power of marginal voices to confront and reshape dominant narratives. This vertical presentation is more than just a spatial decision; it is a deliberate curatorial choice aimed at encouraging audiences to explore new perspectives through the disturbing, uncomfortable, contradictory, absurd, and sometimes perverse aspects of this work. Such a provocative entrance piece set the tone for our exhibition, which promised transformation, inviting audiences to reflect on their own acts of refusal and to envision new realities.

Linna
In Kwak's work, unruly movements and a series of strange gestures embody a form of resistance to the patriarchal gaze and the violence of objectification, while the glittering rhinestone light of their work gives the viewer a neutral and serene seduction. Kwak's incorporation of a subtle decorative aesthetic involves not only ambivalent nostalgia for and rejection of race and identity, but also a discussion of the flesh and the fantasy of transforming it into an aesthetic object. These aesthetic strategies are rooted in Kwak's desire to reveal different ways of understanding our bodies, to explore the difference of the self, and to embrace community in collective action. Combining elegant shimmering embellishments and the gaze(s) of power, Kwak's work reflects a viewer's inner desires amidst the glitter.

Hattie
Kwak experiments with materiality to reimagine queer bodies and explore the connections between the individual, the community, and the earth. *Surveillance Mirror Vaginis III* intermixes industrial materials, such as polystyrene and fiberglass, with organic compounds, such as soil and rocks. Amidst a seemingly molten landscape appear glimpses of human forms, drawing unexpected parallels between associations of plastic as a hazardous material and plasticity as a mode of being. When creating *Circle Dance of the Divine Queer Futures*, Kwak used urethane resin to capture impressions of their community, which are then abstracted through texture, bold color, and distortion. Each embellished hand casting feeds into the next, formally and metaphorically gesturing towards eternity, as well as a wider form of resistance against objectification rooted in shapeshifting and multiplicity. In conceptualizing queerness through hybridized human forms, both *Circle Dance of the Divine Queer Futures* and *Surveillance Mirror Vaginis III* make critical interventions in industrial and organic materials



alike, challenging how we perceive bodies in the first place.

Darlene
Kwak's two pieces were among the few sculptures in our exhibition, so their placement was of utmost importance. We placed *Surveillance Mirror Vaginis III* at the entrance of the exhibition, setting the tone for the entire show. Its distinctive shape effectively draws visitors into the space, while the reflective surface invites them to become part of the artwork, fostering a sense of inclusion and prompting self-reflection from the start. This piece served as an entrance not only to the physical space of the exhibition but also to the conceptual space it represents, emphasizing the exhibition's commitment to challenging norms from the outset. *Circle Dance of the Divine Queer Futures* is positioned in the far-left corner of the gallery. Since most of the works in the exhibition were two-dimensional, the placement of this sculpture added depth to the overall layout, creating a more dynamic visual experience. Moreover, its placement in the corner offered visitors a more personal space to engage with the art and symbolizes how marginalized groups are often pushed to the fringes of society, while maintaining their connection and strength, as suggested by the interconnected hands.

Lisa
Kwak's artworks are dazzling, and attracted the attention and comments of many viewers. Without providing specific introductory paragraphs to define the meaning of the works, many viewers made various interpretations based on their own experiences. Some expressed confusion or curiosity about the artist's original intent. Due to the unique shapes and rich textures of the





Young Joon Kwak
Circle Dance of Divine Queer Futures, 2022
Resin, holographic rhinestones, copper tubing, paint, wax
48 x 48 x 7.25 in. (122 x 122 x 18 cm)

Photo©2023 Yubo Dong, ofstudio

works, some viewers expressed a strong desire to touch or physically interact with the pieces to gain a deeper understanding. Everyone instinctively observed these two pieces from multiple angles, feeling the touch of a hand in the artwork, as rhinestones, mirrors, and lights intersect and reflect, embodying what they hold in their hearts.

Alice
The iridescent and glittery rhinestones in Kwak's *Circle Dance of the Divine Queer Futures* create a sense of visual excess. Containing reflective materials, the rhinestones' shine disrupts our normative vision. As the radiant material covers up the cast of hands, rhinestones enact what Anne Anlin Cheng calls the "second skin" of bodies. The unceasing movement of the rhinestones constantly anticipates a point in time that is yet to arrive, putting queer and trans bodies in fugitive states of "becoming" against easy categorization. Rhinestones' ability to disrupt temporality by collapsing the future and the present, queers the linearity of straight Western time while affectively impacting bodies that pass by the sculpture. Kwak's use of rhinestones is reminiscent of the critical employ of glitter in queer history to bring about social change. As TL Cowan states in "Glitterfesto," glitter-based social performance represents "feminists and trans and sex workers and border hoppers and stowaways in brilliant coalition."[1]

[1] T.L. Cowan, "GLITTERfesto: An Open Call in Trinity Formation for a Revolutionary Movement of Activist Performance Based on the Premise that Social Justice is Fabulous," *Canadian Theatre Review* 150 (Spring 2012), 19

Coyote Park
Ten Thousand Honeymoons, 2021-2022
Inkjet print
24 x 36 in.



To-do: Recall your last intimate encounter. How did you voice your desires? Do you articulate yourself with the same force and passion elsewhere?

A person's back intertwines with another one's limbs. Wrinkled sheets. Dimmed lights. Bodies with no faces. Distorted physiques.

Despite the lack of prominent physical identifiers to these figures, the lighting and carnal imagery in Coyote Park's side by side photos, *Ten Thousand Honeymoons I* and *Ten Thousand Honeymoons II* hint at intimate possibilities of what once was, the spiritual residue of bodies searching for and expanding the existing knowledges of pleasure. These photographs leave us to endless imagination of the capacious configurations of two individuals working towards mutual satisfaction.

The red and blue tones of the images recall the title of Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (2001), which chronicles the sexual activities in New York City's Times Square in the 1980s before its gentrification under the Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani mayoral regimes. As part of the artist's "Ten Thousand Honeymoons" series (2021-2022), these photographs of Park and their partner were taken at the Mustang Motel in Leimert Park, a neighborhood right outside of downtown Los Angeles. Similar to the way Delaney highlights thesexual remains behind New York's corporatized urban landscapes, Park refre-shes our perception of an unassuming Southern California motel by indicating its erotic potentialities through the chromo registers of our visuality. Despite the privacy of queer sexual activities within motel rooms,



Alice Zhao

these two photographs render such practices public as they are displayed within our gallery space. Since queer and trans of color lives are often overshadowed with loss and grief, these images not only forefront queer pleasure within a traditionally heteronormative space (an art institution), but also serve as anti-essentialist statements with their prioritization of corporeal pleasure over any easily legible identity. Meanwhile, by blurring the figures in the photos and employing abstraction as a strategy of representation, Park's privileging of indeterminate modes of embodiment refuses visibility, recognition, and other strategies of modern identity politics that often risk begetting more harm than benefit for queer of color communities under surveillance.

To do: Turn off the light in your room, or wherever you are reading this. Think about the last time you went out. How did you prepare for the night? How did it unfold? How did you let loose in ways you couldn't under the imperatives of (day)light? What memories does your body still hold from it?

Like the queer photographer Dean Sameshima's series of photographs "In between days (without you)" (1997-98) which captured the remains of his own bathhouse encounters during the height of the AIDS pandemic, Park's photos not only highlight the motel as a safe zone for queer sex, but represent it as an active site for the access of and experimentation with corporeal pleasure. By asserting the erotic as a generative portal through which we come to understand ourselves, they bring us closer in touch with our bodies by emphasizing our every day embodied experiences. Nayan Shah points out in his essay "Queer of Color Estrangement and





Coyote Park
Ten Thousand Honeymoons, 2021-2022
Inkjet print
24 x 36 in.

Belonging," that while queer people of color are often susceptible to the hypervisibility of race, they suffer from the invisibility of desire.[1] Working aga-inst dominant modes of visuality, these photos propose an alternative model of conceptualizing minoritarian identity formed around queer and trans of color desire while avoiding the reiteration of tight borders of race and sexuality under neoliberalism. Considering that the majority of motels in the U.S. are owned by South Asian immigrants, this group of work also highlights historically overlooked narratives of queer Asian American sustenance.

To-do: Think of a recent moment you lost yourself. Was it while you were out dancing? Was it flipping through the rack of vintage sequins at the thrift store? Was it seeing your favorite band? Hold all these moments, times, and places together, feel the expansiveness of your body and psyche.

As I look at these photographs closely, I thought about adrienne maree brown's description of the deeply moving power of witnessing "beautiful moments of historically oppressed people engaging in radical acts of public pleasure."[2] Documenting nonwhite bodies under nonwhite lights, on journeys of striving for a life not bounded by grief, Park's photos epitomize them and their partner's wayward searches for fullness and more emotionally embodied paths queer and trans of color lives can take form. When Asian subjects are portrayed in Western popular culture as racially abject and sexually deviant, when we live among the rise of violence towards gender-nonconforming bodies, and when we endure the cultural legacies of anti-miscegenation laws, these images are deeply affirming reminders of our

bodies' radical capacity to build affective kinship and to heal from systemically entrenched harm. As critical reminders that we are not broken forever, they highlight the possibilities for bodies that carry intergenerational, colonial, heteropatriarchal trauma to get lost in pleasure in the most unassuming spots of an overcapitalized city. As Audre Lorde characterizes of the profound power of the erotic, once we learn about our corporeal capacity for pleasure and unlearn the historical cycles of suffering, we will no longer settle for pessimism and negativity as our way of life.[3] I once again turn to adrienne maree brown's wisdom, "Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom."[4] Pleasure bears the possibility of the world we want to live in, as long as we allow ourselves to embrace it.

To-do: Think of a time you felt profoundly "whole". Who were you with? What time of the day was it? How did the air smell? Recall how you felt and use it as your guide to imagine the unscripted possibilities of this coming day.

1 Nayan Shah, "Queer of Color Estrangement and Belonging," in *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, eds. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 262–75.

2 Adrienne Maree Brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), 438.

3 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Feminism And Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 569–74.

4 Brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 441.

Toni Smalls
Suburban Flood, 2020
Inkjet print
24 x 30 in.


NO PARKING

Plastic Mountains

Plastic mountains sprout from my back
Scissor tongues eat mind veins like lose string

Tethered pixels, little coals -
Same shimmer with or without their whole

Sprawled out lump on grainy floor
Plastic mountains treat palms the same
Prickles growing on the grabby springs
Flaring water boiled smell on rotten toes

The sinkholes invited me in for lunch
Viridian bumps on skin crumbs
Reptilian cold seeping into a mainframe
Blood barriers, carriers refusing an apology

Can't it wait until I get better?

Vultures slouch towards my leftovers -
Intestines meeting with pulverized highs
The sun burns as it sits deeper
Hammocks in the royal pockets

Diaphragms expand into molded sockets
Distance widens where air-legs go

Can't it wait until my soul gets wetter?

Air pressured wells on precipice tops
Oxygen drunk lungs in weathered cups

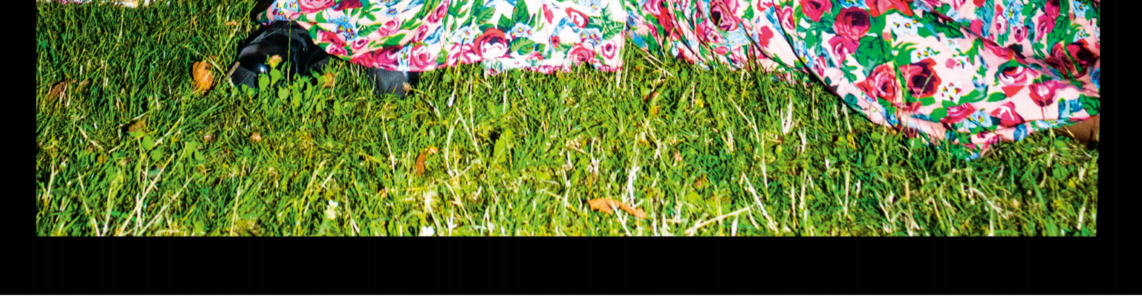


Poems by Toni Smalls

Toni Smalls
Earth Landing, 2019
Inkjet print
24 x 30 in.



Toni Smalls
Intermingled Realities, 2020
Inkjet print
24 x 30 in.



Crawlers

The wet dirt will dry back onto my skin.
If I stop breathing, roaches will start
Nibbling on uncharted territories.

My tongue’s love to bitter grape
Bitter lakes, sweeter paste pushed out of
Pulled bones. Velcro on hand lines
Fastened incapacities, Sunken moans.

Antennas in my eyes.
I wonder where the bodies lay
When one mind holds the scattered flakes
The Peeling.

When the tub scrapes off my gray spots
And the spots scrape off my trembled lips

Enough to see the dented poles
Holding up the stuffed skin
Crawlers bed-making in crevices

I have jungle bits in my sheets
With the Ether wrapped around my feet
Shredded glass mirrors entangled vine
I wonder if I am mine.

Under Inner Core

I’ve buried myself under particular language.

Drooling sunset off my tongue-tip, yellow
Inked pink-mind. Waves blocked by the bright
Light; starry day where I should have dug
better under the crusty skin, rancid skin,
Unused skin. Skin that doesn’t work right.

Skin that does nothing but carry a way of seeing things
Holding my weight over water-made arms, wavering
Wondering, “Are my reflections an amalgamation of
Anything that I would do for your eyes?”

Surprise the mold grown effortlessly on
Shower-curtain escapades :
Life emerging through polyester print
Lit on fire, ripped, crumbled, burned, eroded
Badlands

Sad man sleeps under the sandbags as the
Beach evolves into an ocean losing her counterweight
And I’ve buried myself under particular language.

Meteorites burn craters where they see space.
Wiping the universe on my jeans, wet anti-gravity
Clarity in the muddled paints; colored lingo

I speak to crickets sometimes, in my mind
Even the silence has final chapters.

And the dead languages are products of their societies
Quietly, the cells birth new skin
Under Inner Core
Where the words can’t seem to flutter anymore



Toni Smalls
Under Inner Core, 2021
Video
Approx. 5 mins

Photo©2023 Yubo Dong, ofstudio

Peidi Zhang
Under Your Skin, 2022
Inkjet print
16 x 16 in.



Harmonizing Friendship and Empowerment in the Photographic Frame

Peidi Zhang

Darlene Zhang

Browsing through artist Peidi Zhang's Instagram feels like entering a dream world; one that is uniquely hers.[1] Her photographs—their settings, their color palettes—appear as if they are cap-tured from a film that never fades, giving each photo an ethereal quality, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality: men in dresses, naked girls running through forests, lovers embracing in deserts with indistinct faces, female strength thriving under butterfly wings. She excels in conveying emotions through her photographs, each frame capturing a moment of rebellion and hope from her little utopia against reality. In her world, the usual definitions and norms are loosened. What may seem strange and unconventional in our world is beautiful and ordinary in Peidi's utopia.

An independent photographer based in Pasadena, California, Peidi Zhang specializes in portrait and fashion photography. A self-described feminist and activist, she often raises her voice for LGBTQ and women's communities through her work by exploring themes like homosexual intimacy, gender ambiguity, and female empowerment. These themes are deeply intertwined with her work experiences and the friends surrounding her.

At the start of her photography career, Peidi's style was much different from now. At that time she was influenced by photographer Yoshihiko Ueda, and her work was more conservative, exuding a traditional Eastern aesthetic of tranquility and haziness. Although she still focused on portraits, the subjects were often calmly looking at the camera or blending in with the scenery. The significant difference in style, Peidi mentions, is mainly due to the change in themes and a bolder

approach in her work. She hesitantly reveals that she has always been part of the bisexual community, and in China, she realized she had an extraordinary affection for women. However, most East Asian countries are very reticent on this topic, and she felt that she didn't belong in her environment. Yet, it is this experience that made her pay more attention and cherish female agency, possibly because she found an inner strength and sense of unity when facing challenges and isolation.

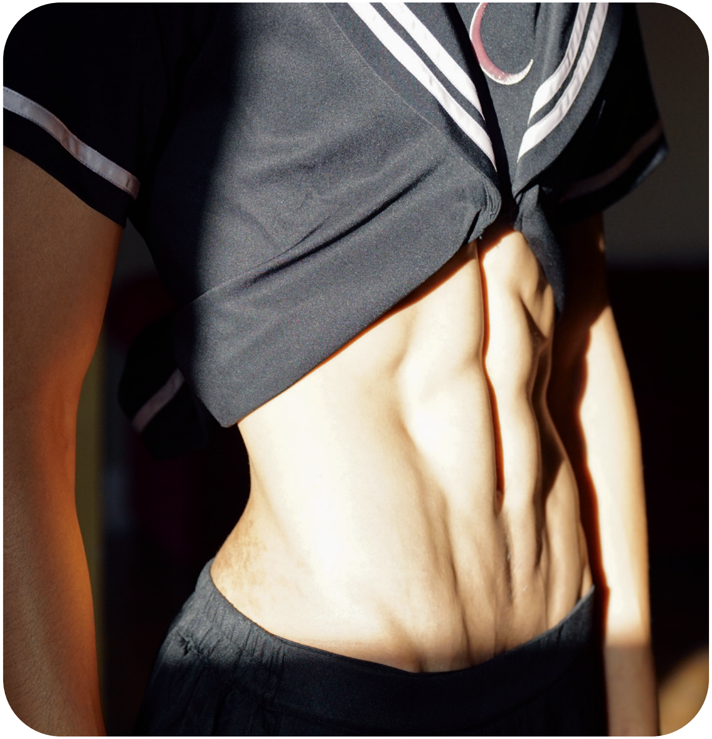
After coming to the United States her work focused more on depicting the portraits of young Asian artists influenced by Western culture. The advanced gender concepts of these artists often clash with the traditional views of their parents, but it is this contradiction that further ignites their exploration of gender diversity and individual uniqueness. By depicting this group, Peidi's understanding and support for gender identity and the LGBTQ community have deepened. This development in thought is not only reflected in her personal growth but also in her artistic creation, l aying the foundation for her later establishment of a photographic utopia.

Peidi emphasizes that when selecting models and deciding on the shooting style, she focuses on whether the mod-els resonate with her creative goals and themes, and can display the emotions and atmosphere she wants in front of the camera. Therefore, she prefers to collaborate with individuals who have distinct personalities, can express emotions, and resonate with her own energy, ensuring that the final work authentically reflects their collaborative spirit and creativity. Most of her friends are young Asian and Asian-American artists, often sharing similar cultural backgrounds as well as creative ideas with her. Whether as friends or models, they provide rich inspiration for Peidi's creations and naturally present the content she wants to express. This deep understanding and collaborative work make her art more genuine and vivid.

Peidi actively talks about the depiction of nudity in her work, recounting a memorable instance when a Chinese female friend approached her to take nude photos. Initially, she was surprised because nudity is often considered taboo in Chinese society due to traditional culture and social values. This was reflected in Peidi's upbringing, where modesty and conservatism were highly valued, and body coverage seen as a form of respect for oneself and others. Traditional moral concepts and social beliefs also emphasized restraint and humility, making nudity often viewed as inappropriate or immoral.[2] Peidi has indeed photographed nude portraits before, seeing nudity not merely as a symbol of sexuality or provocation but as a natural and beautiful expression. However, this time, she faced a woman who grew up in East Asian culture, and her confidence and acceptance of her body made Peidi realize that many young East Asians are awakening their gender consciousness, becoming bolder and more willing to express and display themselves. She says explicitly: "I accept my body, I appreciate my body, and I have the right to decide how I want to use and display it."

One of Peidi's works, *Under Your Skin* (2022), which was programmed into *Wayward Refusals*, is a profound representation of female power. The model, a friend of Peidi's who is also a film director, was captured in her last





Peidi Zhang
Afterwards, 2022
Inkjet print
red:12 x 12 in.
black:9 x 9 in.





Peidi Zhang
Afterwards, 2022
Inkjet print
red:12 x 12 in.
black:9 x 9 in.

moments before changing her iconic blue hair. Growing up as the quintessentiaI Asian 'good girl' under her parents' expectations, she longed to achieve conventional success. Yet, a rebellious spirit grew within her, leading her to boldly cut her hair short and dye it blue–a color her parents deemed inappropriate. Standing half-naked in an empty room, with butterfly projections on her, it seemed as though a vibrant force was emanating from her, ready to metamorphose into a better future. Peidi also believes that this is the best version of her friend–not because of her success, but because of her certainty in herself and her rebellion against her restrictive upbringing. The force of self-possession is relentless, and Peidi hopes her work will inspire more girls to break free from societal views. In this way the life experience of the Peidi's model is like a butterfly, fragile and sensitive yet full of strength, and fearlessly mobile. The power of young women should never be underestimated or overlooked because beneath the visible exterior, an unseen, fervent energy pulses.

Piedi's *Sensation* (2023) was also a collaborative effort, featuring metallic bow ties from her friend Aiyi Cheng, who has appeared multiple times in Peidi's works. In these works, her performance is not confined to conventional norms, whether it's her movements or makeup-both are full of personality and creativity. Her art is equally full of surprises, as she likes to use hard materials to shape soft objects. This showcases a strength and beauty that is different from the typical gentle and reserved image, which is also reflec-ted in the collaboration between Aiyi Cheng and Peidi in this work. Typically associated with femininity and softness, the metallic bow ties are instead hard, cold, and angular. They resemble the sharp, restrictive stereotypes that confine gendered experience. In the work, the models, Peidi's boyfriend and another male friend, wear Cheng's large metallic bow tie skirts, presenting them as embodied contradictions.

Peidi's biggest influence is her partner, who is her muse and also her most loyal model. Through him she sees qualities she believes are rare in this world. In *Afterwards* (2022) he appears dressed in a skirt, dancing freely in a dream-like space. In daily life he often goes out in a normatively-coded feminine dress, applies makeup, and paints his nails, presenting as gender-fluid. In him, Peidi sees an unusual courage, a readiness to defy societal norms and engage in behaviors deemed unconventional. For them, the skirt in this work does not symbolize femininity but stands as a garment without attributes, free for anyone, of any gender, to wear. Thus, this empty room is more like a corner of her utopia, a space where people have the chance to understand the meaning, stance, and purpose of their existence. Here, there are no distinctions of gender or status, only the pure self, fully immersed in exploring one's own identity. Although there is still a lot of uncertainty in the real world, Peidi says that there are an increasing number of artists like her who explore the relationship between individual and identity through their work and challenge traditional gender norms. Everyone is spontaneously conveying their voices and ideas to society, which is a good sign of gradually moving towards freedom. This is because breaking the traditional social norms will always be a boundary that artists desire to break through.

For Peidi, the people around her are not just friends; they are an endless source of inspiration for her creativity. In the long, uncertain days ahead, the one certainty is that she will continue to pursue photography. She relays, “Sometimes, a great photo isn’t the result of solo effort, but the collaboration and clash of many artists. In the world of photography, I don’t want to be an island. I aim to share my artistic vision with more people.”

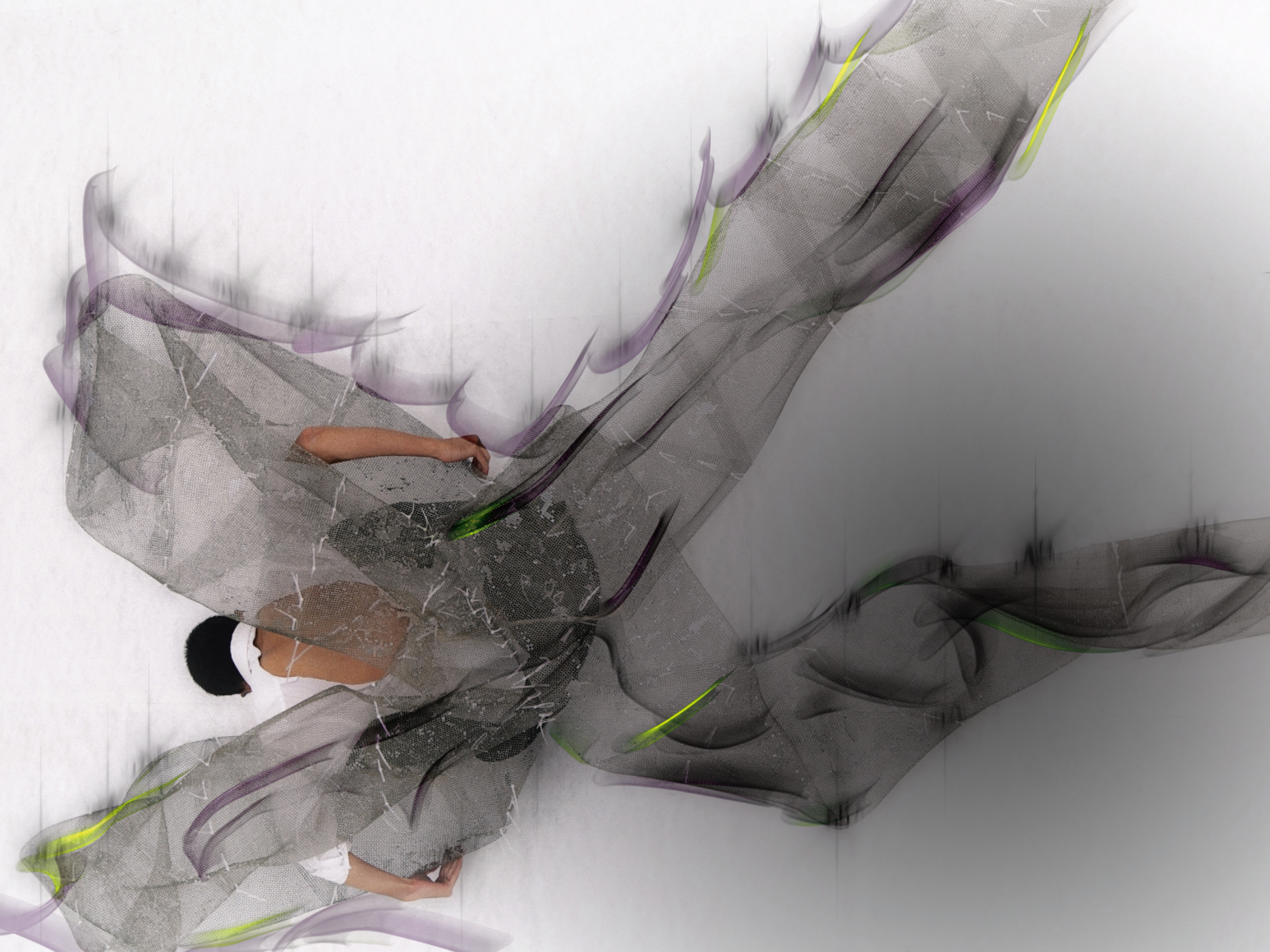




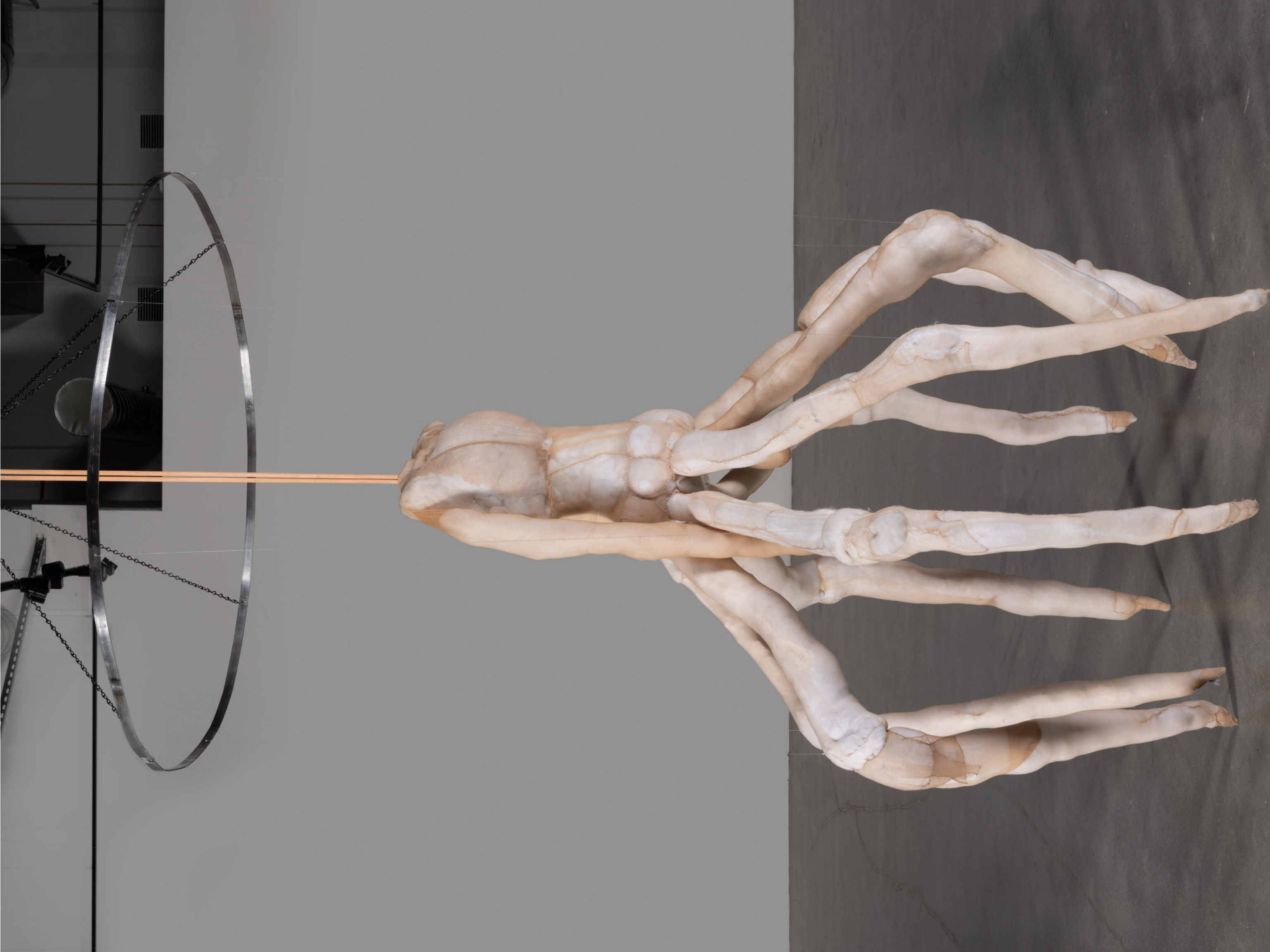
Peidi Zhang
Sensation, 2023
Inkjet print
12 x 15 in.

1 The information in this essay is largely sourced from two interviews with the artist. Peidi Zhang, interviews by Darlene Zhang, Jan 19, 2024 and February 19, 2024.

2 Zhongzai Zhang, “The Comparison of Body and Soul - The Nude View in Chinese and Western Cultures” China Digital Times, May 30, 2013

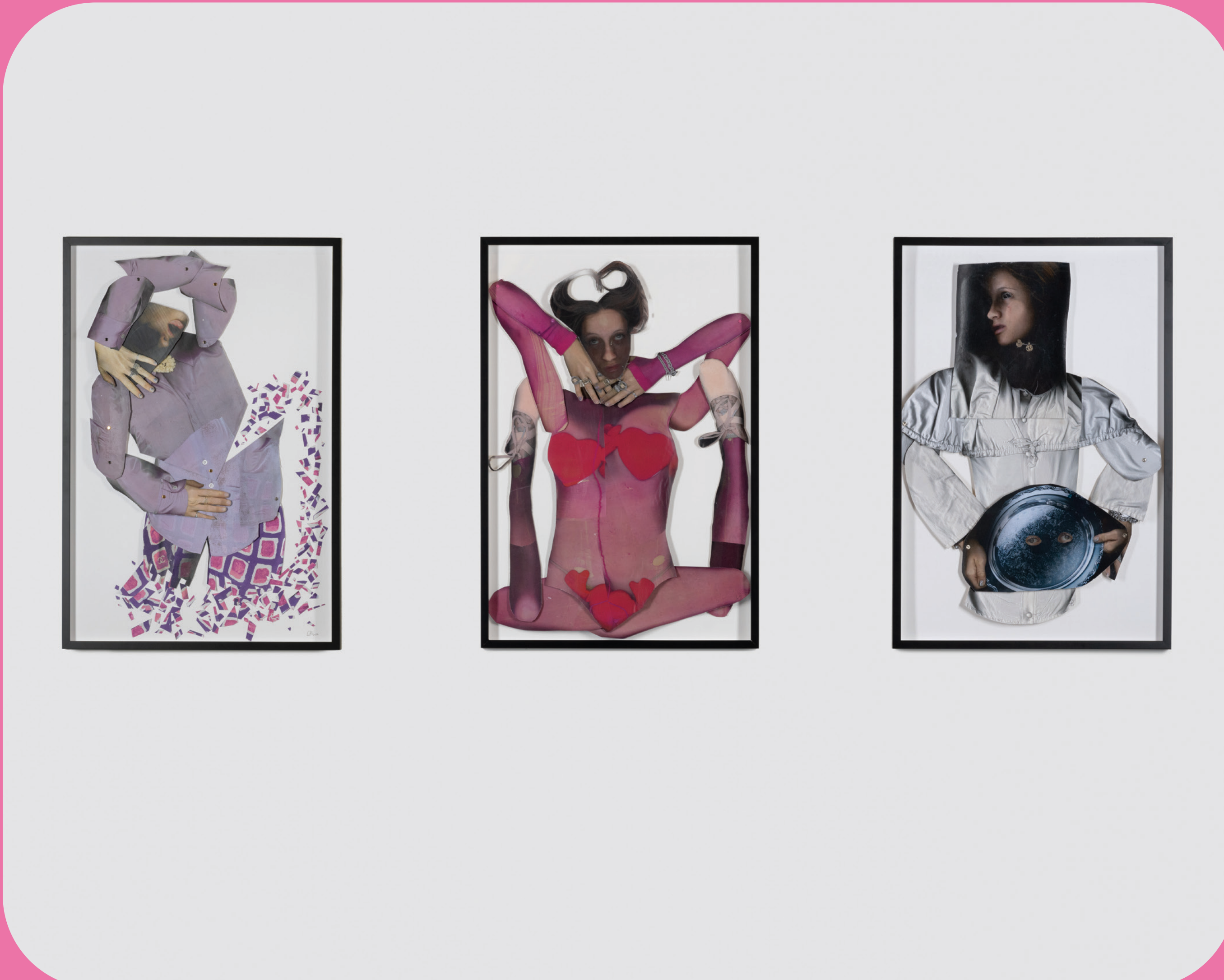


Lucy Black
Mama Spider, 2021
Tights, stuffing, recycled materials, hanger wire, steel hoop, fishing line, workout resistance band
60 x 36 x 36 in.



“Showing It to People Is the Other Half of Art” A Conversation with Lucy Black

In works that combine collage and a puppet-maker’s ingenuity, artist Lucy black animates some of contemporary feminism’s most potent concerns. The works included in *Wayward Refusals*—three wall-based works featuring kinetic collages of body: *Cupid*, *Lucella Barbarella* and *Saint Lucy*; and a hanging sculpture of a spider’s maternal body, *Mama Spider*—helped to articulate Lucy’s understanding in art practice so far. In this transcript of a recorded conversation, the artist reflects on the exhibition, Louise Bourgeois, and the idea that art can be a refusal all its own.



Lucy Black
Cupid, 2023
Paper, cardboard, and brad joints
24 x 36 in.

Lucella Barbarella, 2023
Paper, cardboard, and brad joints
24 x 36 in.

Saint Lucy, 2023
Paper, cardboard, and brad joints
24 x 36 in.

Lisa Nie (LN) Let's start with navigating your artistic practice. Could you walk us through your creative process, especially how you incorporate performance, collage, photography, and sculpture in your artwork?

Lucy Black (LB) Absolutely. My process starts with a feeling. Something that feels so intangible, I try to make it tangible. Giving physicality. And things get rolling when I play with material. Usually, the material is whatever I have access to at that given moment and a feeling of urgency acts as a kind of constraint, but in my favor. The *Mama Spider* that was shown in the show began this way. I was working at a costume warehouse and there were a bunch of tights that were going to be thrown away, so I kept them, and thus began my soft-sculpture era. Photography is a big part of my process as well because it is so immediate and concrete in an otherwise distorted reality.

LN So besides the physical process, is there anything you would like to mention about the themes or inspirations? Your works often explore the themes of identity, nostalgia, and the uncanny. What inspires you to delve into these particular aspects of the human experience?

LB First and foremost my art is about dissociation. The feeling like I have a non-belonging with my body, like my body doesn't belong to me. How I relate to the body with a past of sexual trauma. My work, in a way, is trying to cure myself and others. The body, to me, feels like such an unfamiliar thing. That is the base of my art and then weaved in is humor, the absurdity of it all. My work is a combination of all the visual influences I have taken in throughout my life. Whatever I'm observing at the time seems to seep out into my work a couple of months later. In college I was enthralled with the Surrealist movement and that nostalgic obsession is still working its way into my current artistic processes.

LN Are there any specific artists you would name that you took inspiration from, who maybe also utilize the body concept?

LB Louise Bourgeois is a very big one for me. Kara Walker as well. There are so many people, including David Hammons. I really like his work, he does a lot of these body prints, where he covers himself in some kind of grease and uses it like a stamp. The physicality of what it takes to make an object/piece is inspiring. Also have pulled a lot of inspiration from Penny Slinger, Ana Mendieta, Pipilotti Rist, Greer Lankton, and Senga Nengudi.

LN So great to hear about your artistic inspirations and ideas in detail. Then let's dive into the exhibition, considering the exhibition's theme of "conscious acts of refusal," how do you believe your art aligns with the idea of dismantling the status quo and embracing alternative ways of living?

LB I think the idea of "wayward refusals" relates to my work in many ways. Firstly, in my material, I really like to use found objects. The act of collecting things that are discarded and creating something precious from objects that previously held no "value." Living as an artist is actively fighting the status quo, prioritizing uncomfortable feelings and staying vulnerable will always make the work better. Making art in itself is a conscious, active refusal.

LN Now that the exhibition has concluded, how do you reflect on the overall experience? Or how do you see other artists reflected on themes?

LB It was so great to be part of the show. The big spider I had never shown before and doing so made it feel complete. She had been sitting in my aunt's garage for two years and bringing her to life felt like a finale of sorts. Showing my work to people is the other half of art for me.

LN Now looking back at the exhibition, how do you interpret Saidiya Hartman's concept of "wayward experiments" in the context of your own artistic practice and the theme of the exhibition?

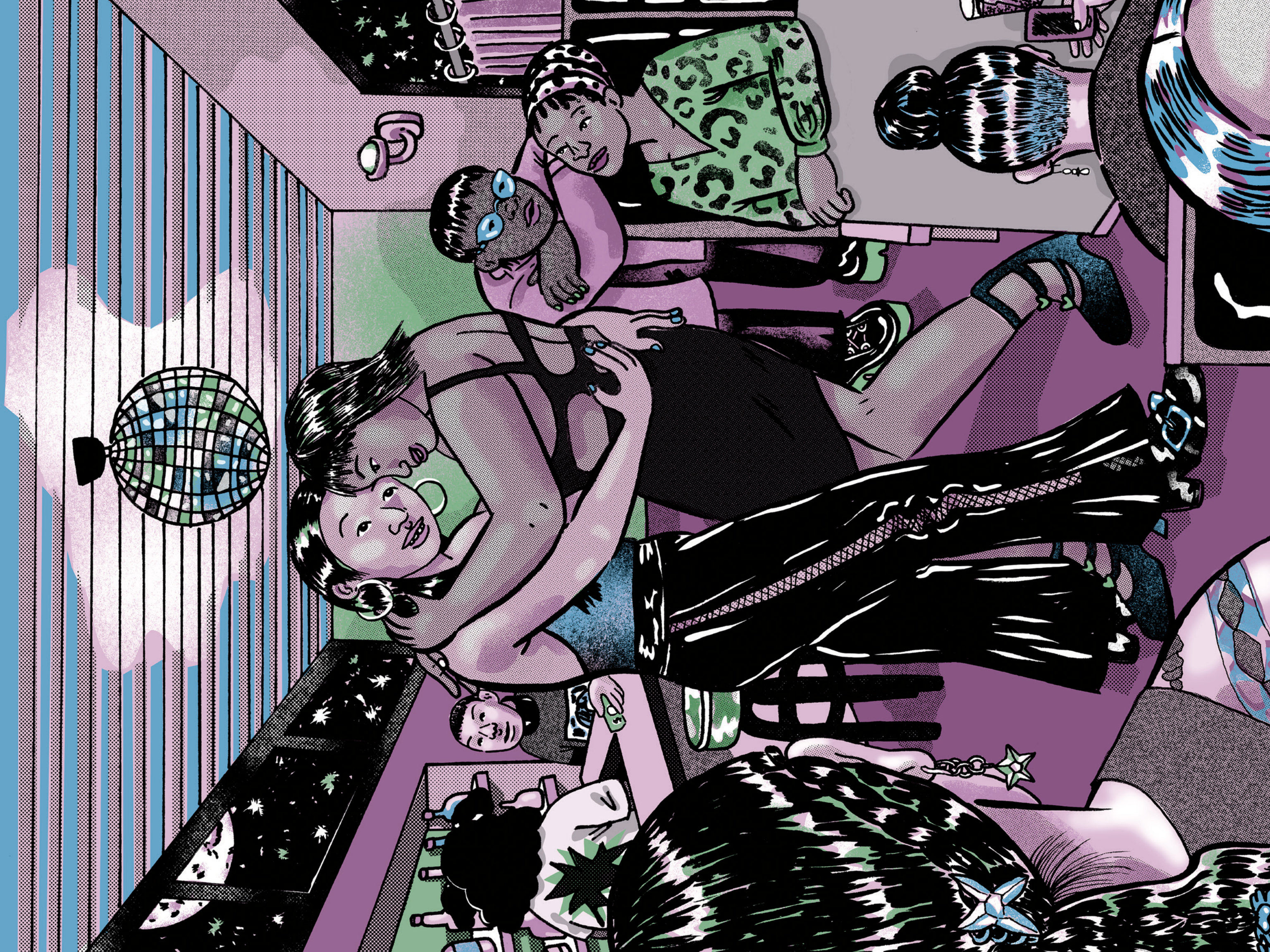
LB Making art in a way is an act of "wayward experiments" and rebellion in a world that does not prioritize that act. Seeing how things affect you, and how you affect others.

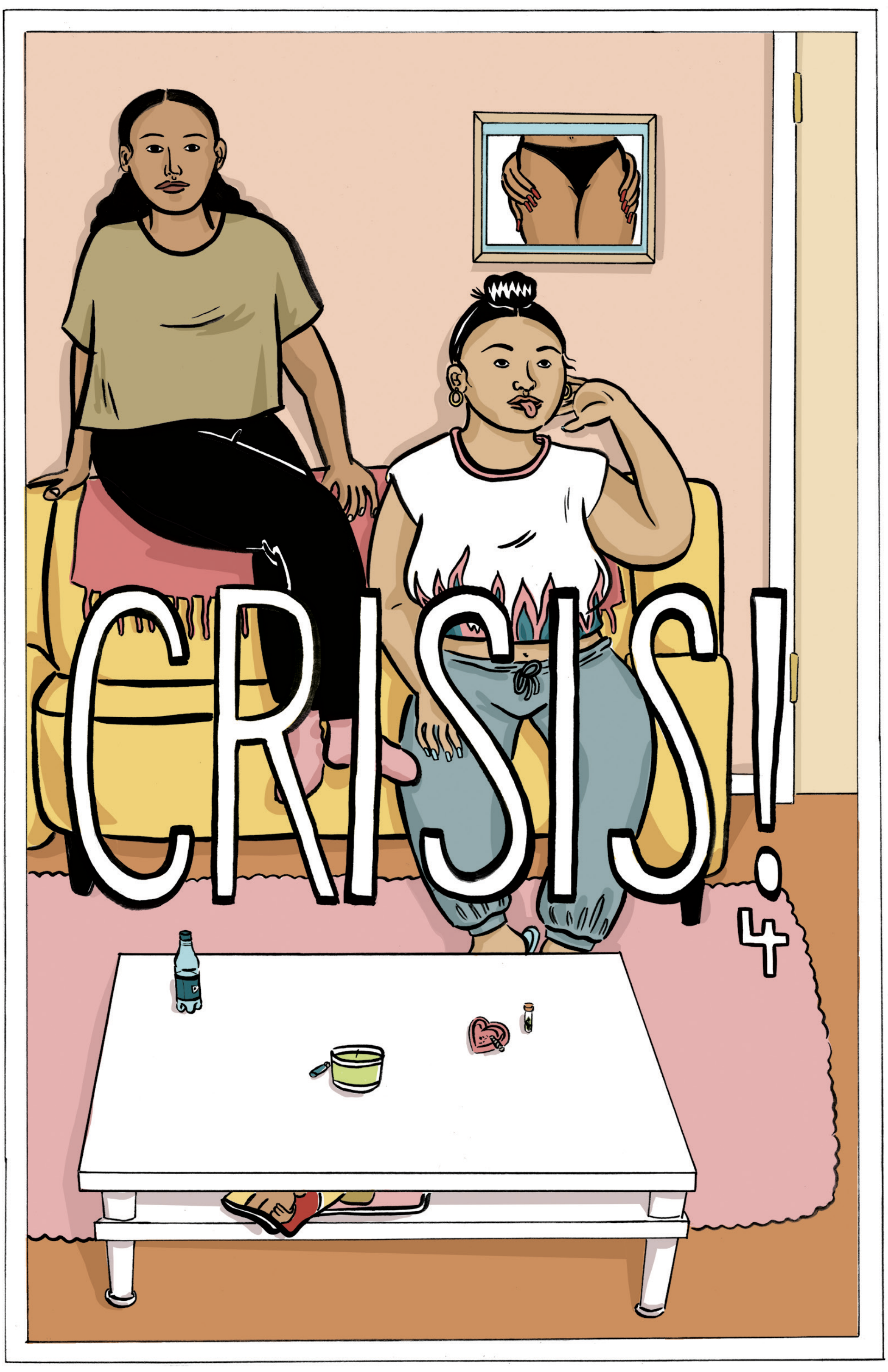
LN Standing at the fresh start of 2024 and looking ahead for your own art practice, is there any specific direction that you might be already working on, or may want to explore in the upcoming New Year?

LB I think in the future I’ll just keep expanding on the things I have been working on. I’m working on the life cycle of a spider, which includes the piece I previously showed. I have recently started to put motors into my paper dolls and would like to include this into the spider piece. A lot of good things are coming in 2024!

LN Sounds amazing, looking forward to your future exhibitions, and we’re so grateful to have included your work in our exhibition.

Julia Mata
I'm Trying to Go Here, 2022
Inkjet print
17 x 25 in.




CRISIS!
4


INCOMING
C R I
S I S
! 4
J P M
HELLO, YOU'VE REACHED ISRAELL SUN TRAVEL!
HOLD PLEASE!
TRANSFERRING YOU NOW.
I'M STEPPING OUT!


PARK 5-10
SHIT! ITS COLD
BEAD
HEYY-
EYY! NEW JOB WOO!
HOW'S IT GOING?


it's what you'd expect
but I'm grateful Tío Ariel hooked it up—
and it's temporary
yea! cause you're gonna be a business owner!!
maybe you'll learn something
yea...
uhh it's just
it's kind of...
a triggering workplace
you know?
trust me, I know
but you got this


TTAN 5 min
and honestly as your roommate unless we wanna rent the couch
it is what it is
capitalism...
BEADS
whoosh
these do make me feel better though...
927


yes yes!
so that's exactly why I'd not recommend scheduling now-
because if it's the high holidays -can you really enjoy all-inclusive?
I understand completely
we'll move you to November
CLICK
omg
they're awful. how did you do that?







From left to right

Julia Mata
Butterfly Bebe, 2022
Inkjet print
12 x 12 in.

Isabella Lovestory, 2023
Inkjet print
Inkjet print
12 x 12 in.

Otro Mundo, 2023
Inkjet print
19 x 15 in.

Katinka Huang
People at the Corner Store, 2023
Ink, acrylic, pastel, charcoal on canvas
48 x 30 in.



Skating the Spaces Forged Through Dissociation

Hattie Schultz

In *Wayward Refusals*, dissociation is addressed through a multitude of varying media and representational forms, simultaneously negating and solidifying the subjectivities held by each artist in the exhibition. The anomalous nature of dissociation perhaps reflects the absurdity in discerning selfhood and relationality, a contested topic that moves beyond the sphere of art and creative expression. American psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg defines dissociation as the disunion of the mind from the living body, a defense against the inability to process emotionally-fraught mental conflicts.[1] As a loss of the capacity for self-reflection, dissociation (paradoxically) attempts to preserve a unified sense of selfhood through fragmenting the self into self-states.[2] Discerning between normative and defensive psychological practices, Bromberg identifies two different kinds of dissociation, the first being adaptive (healthy) and the second pathological, or psychologically detrimental.[3] While many of the artists in *Wayward Refusals* pursue



RUTH
Start the Band, 2021
Acrylic, magazine, glitter, ink pen
9 x 7 in.

creative projects that address dissociation, the works of Katinka Huang and RUTH question the foundations of binary classifications such as Bromberg's, transforming passivity into refusal, and exploring how dissociation can be a feminist political project based in relocation and skirting the spaces. Responding in their respective works to circumstantial environments that are not necessarily homes, both RUTH and Huang recast dissociation into a generative practice of allyship, resistance, and creation, illuminating the intersectional nature of the human condition and rooting *Wayward Refusals* in everyday lived experience.

In her depersonalized mode of representing sentiments of non-belonging, RUTH's works echo the themes and methods used by other artists in *Wayward Refusals*. Outsourcing the individual components of her collages from vintage magazines, RUTH distinguishes the images as separate from and unrelated to herself. The utilization of fragments from popular publications such as *LIFE* and *National Geographic*, familiar yet unplaceable, evoke a visual agnosia. RUTH's collages address the initial feelings of uneasiness that come from recognizing that the place in which one finds oneself may not necessarily be where they belong, or where they can thrive. It may lead to the feeling that something is “off”-feelings that are inherent among all the artworks in the exhibition.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam identifies cutting as a feminist aesthetic that creatively furthers the project of female unbecoming.[4] Contextualized within RUTH's practice of collage, queer allyship emerges not only from the artist's refusal to conform to Western ideals of whiteness,

femininity, and heterosexuality, but also in her seeking an "elsewhere" that doesn't force antiquated ideologies upon her and those she feels kinship with. In *Painted White* (2021), the object of the lawn chair commands attention to "an environment steeped with racialized violence" where "the land we walk on is stolen, the labor that produced the things we use is underpaid and exploited, the neighborhoods we live in are either segregated or gentrifying."[5] *Painted White* promotes critical reflection on this idea through irony and abstraction, while *Start the Band* (2021) releases the tension created by the former, responding with a challenge to create a space of one's own where rebellion generates new forms of being. Together, RUTH's works speak to the range of emotional responses to feelings of non-belonging, pivoting rejection towards fostering spaces for thriving. In utilizing a depersonalized mode of representing non-belonging, RUTH evokes the uncanniness of initial feelings of alienation from one's prescribed home while giving herself room to undergo a feminist project that transforms passivity into refusal.

Katinka Huang similarly explores how dissociation can be a feminist project based upon relocation. Responding to racial and gendered pressures to assimilate into Western culture, Huang creates alter egos in her paintings that explore sexuality and femininity, empowering herself with the ability to shapeshift while acknowledging the grotesque. Many of her psychological explorations, such as *People at the corner store* (2023), are centered around the dramatic shift that occurred in her life when she moved from Shanghai to London at the age of eleven, a parachute child seeking

1 Philip M. Bromberg, *Standing in the Spaces: Essays on Clinical Process, Trauma, and Dissociation* (New York: Psychology Press, 2001), 7.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 135.

5 Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 125.

educational opportunities in the West.[6] For Asian Americans, "assimilation into the national fabric demands a psychic splitting," and this fragmentation for Huang takes the shape of partial body forms and floating faces.[7] Within these psychological explorations, a generative space emerges where all the different individual parts that make a whole self can be in conversation with each other, rather than one existing at the expense of the other(s). In this way Huang brings her compositional choices into alignment with her diasporic experiences. Rather than performing the psychological uniformity characteristic of adaptive dissociation, Huang's practice puts her own needs first, a radical act of self-love and world-making that simultaneously rejects the colonial demands to mimic Western ideals of whiteness and femininity.[8]

In their assertions that circumstantial environments are not necessarily homes, Huang and RUTH not only demonstrate how intersecting identities influence the nature of dissociation, but also call for a reconsideration of the binary conceptualizations of subjecthood present in psychoanalytic practices. In Bromberg's rationalization, those who experience adaptive dissociation have the capacity to "stand in the spaces," or be able to make room for subjective reality "that is not readily containable by the self he experiences as 'me' at that moment."[9] However, W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness," which describes the varying (and often conflicting) social spaces that the racial subject must occupy, can be used as a conceptual model to draw attention to how race and racism make Bromberg's concept of "standing in the spaces" easier for some and difficult for others. Written over a century ago, Du Bois' *The Souls of Blackfolk* uses the notion of "double consciousness" to speak on Blackness in the United States. Du Bois explains that to remain true to one's culture and simultaneously assimilate into white, heteronormative society is to double or split the psychic self.[10] While the different subjectivities of Huang and RUTH influence how they speak to non-belonging, they both adopt the stratagem of splitting the self, most visually evident in the disembodied faces that float within their works, complicating the dichotomy between adaptive and pathological dissociation, healthy and sick, passive and radical.

What is perhaps most exciting about the implications of Huang's and RUTH's creative practices is how they impact what has traditionally defined dissociation, namely its negative connotations which suggest breaking and disruption. No longer a passive mode of avoidance or a sign of mental illness, their artwork positions dissociation as a radical practice in worldmaking, centralizing the intersectional nature of identity while rejecting colonial demands of subjectivity. To skirt rather than stand in the spaces begins to feel more comfortable and desirable.

6 David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 27.

7 Ibid., 42-43.

8 Bromberg, *Standing in the Spaces*, 7; Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: TheAmbivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October 28* (Spring 1984): 125-33.

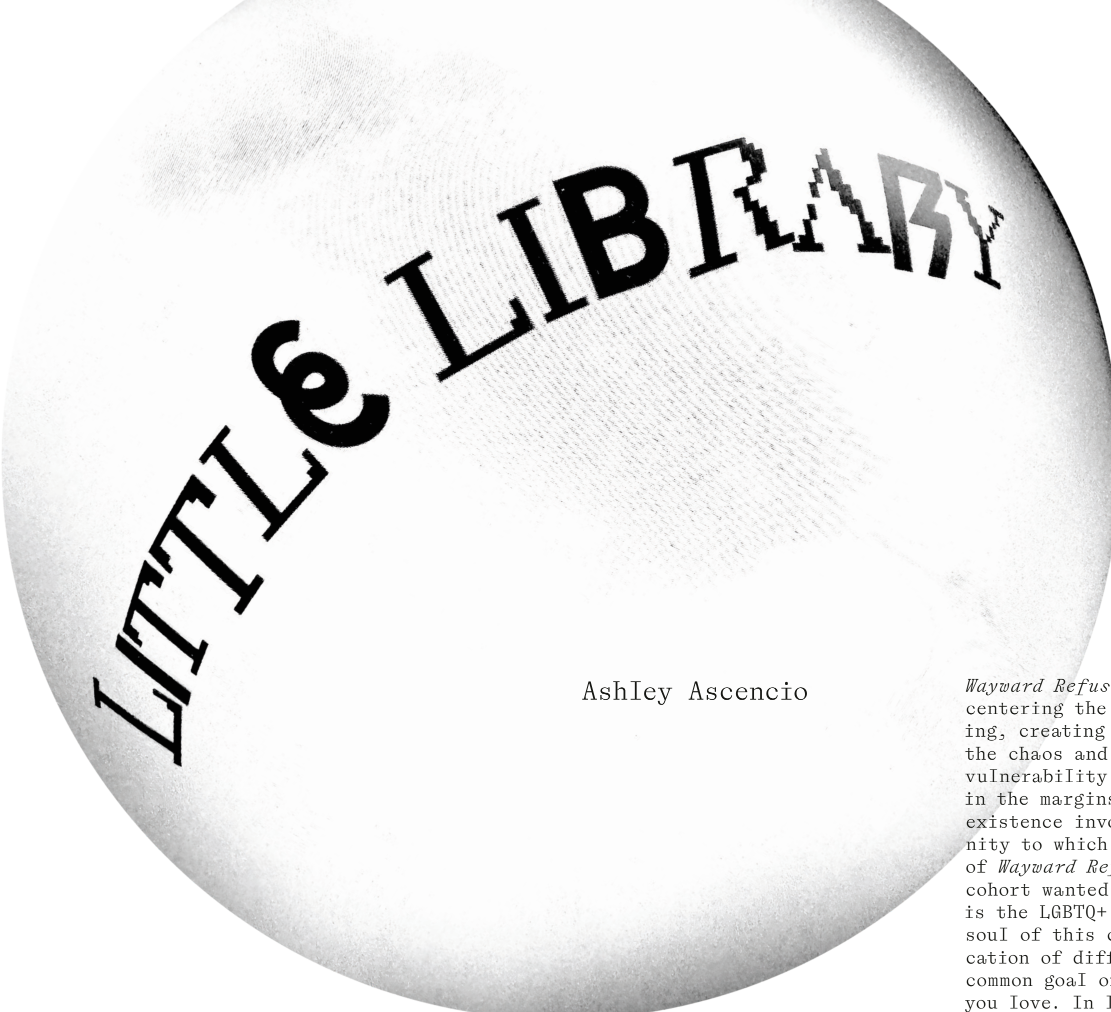
9 Bromberg, *Standing in the Spaces*, 274; Eng and Han, Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation, 122.

10 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg, 1903).



RUTH
Painted White, 2021
Acrylic and magazine cuttings on paper
7.5 x 9 in.


CRUEL OPTIMISM
RISK WORK
MINOR FEELINGS
CATHY PARK HONG



Ashley Ascencio

Wayward Refusals is an exhibition. centering the concept of worldmaking, creating a space to exist within the chaos and noise of the world via the vulnerability of contemporary artists in the margins of society. This space of existence involves creating a community to which one belongs. In the case of *Wayward Refusals*, the community our cohort wanted to highlight and honor is the LGBTQ+ community. The heart and soul of this community is the unification of differing identities for the common goal of the right to love who you love. In line with this theme, and our goal of creating a space for people to interact, as a cohort we ideated "the little library." The little library is a tranquil space in the midst of the creative chaos of *Wayward Refusals*.

The little library encourages community by creating a comfortable space to sit and explore a variety of texts that helped inspire *Wayward Refusals*, from ideation to completion. The comfortable chairs and couches (some owned by the program, and others by members of the cohort and faculty) created a living room-like atmosphere where viewers could relax, read or peruse the provided texts, or converse with friends and/or strangers. We incorporated the works of Julia Mata and Cyshimi as part of this arrangement, defamiliarizing and recoding some of the domesticity of the little library's arrangement. Each member of this cohort comes from different fields and backgrounds. For example, I have a background in anthropology while some of my classmates come from the disciplines of art history, architecture, and fashion design. Yet, together we forged a community founded upon a respect for these differences. I feel that we are all the better for these differences. This bears a similarity to the heterogeneity valued within the LGBTQ+ communities, which typically includes members from radically different backgrounds. Because of this, such community formations are strong. I aim to explore the concept of community and how communities are formed in relation to our own attempt at community creation utilizing the little library.

Benedict Anderson, a social theorist and anthropologist, argues that communities "are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[1] Anderson's argument is that a community is only defined when it can be imagined as an entity. When the LGBTQ+ is mentioned, it is reified in a listener's mind and, as such, made concrete as a community. Anderson goes on to say that a community is only imagined because "the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[2] Anderson discusses nation as his primary example here; however, the concept of an *imagined community* can be used for any community where members might not already know one another personally. Members of the LGBTQ+ will never meet every other member, however, there is still a sense of shared history and values, such as pride and activism.

Anderson also contrastingly describes the community as limited "because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations."[3] This point is key–there are people who belong within communities such as the LGBTQ+ community and there are people who do not; yet the boundaries are not always so firm. For example, what about the position of allies within LGBTQ+ communities? It is here where the concept of community gets both complicated and incredible. Allies, as well as members of other communities, unite and support one another in the fight for human rights. This intricate web of allyship forms a strong kinship and, often, lifelong friendships.

Related is Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* or *anti-structure*. Turner describes anti-structure as, "the state of outsiderhood, referring to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the struc-tu-ral arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system."[4] Turner argues that *commu-*







Photo©2023 Yubo Dong, ofstudio

nitas, or *anti-structure*, can be voluntary or it can be forced, however, the outcome is the same: a community outside of the social structure is formed. This community "…is most evident in liminality" or the vulnerable spaces in between, as this cohort describes, chaos and noise. Many communities are formed outside of the greater social structure, I argue that most communities are formed in the liminal spaces where "…people share a certain set of interconnected systems…"[5] Our cohort is considered a community because we have taken many classes together as well as authored an exhibition and its accompanying texts. We are also a community because we want to see one another not only survive but thrive long after our classes end and we walk across the stage to receive our degrees.

In creating the little library within *Wayward Refusals*, we hoped to create a liminal space, betwixt and between the noise and creative vulnerability of the works on display. A space where community would thrive and flourish, not in spite of the chaos, but because of the chaos. We wanted to encourage gallery visitors to sit and take art in, perhaps striking up a conversation with a fellow visitor… because communities really are formed in the in-between spaces, uniting people who share interconnected systems.

Little Library Texts

Depression: A Public Feeling by Ann Cvetkovich
The Faces by Tove Ditlevsen
Cruel Optimism by Lauren Berlant
The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson
Housekeeping by Marilynne Robinson
The Queer Art of Failure by Jack Halberstam
Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans by Eng, David L., and Shinhee Han
How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity by La Marr Jurelle Bruce
Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity by José Esteban Muñoz
Outline of a Theory of Practice by Pierre Bourdieu
Division of Labor in Society by Emile Durkheim
Madness and Civilization by Michel Foucault
Discipline and Punish by Michel Foucault
Purity and Danger by Mary Douglas
Magnet by Toni Smalls
The Managed Hand : Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work by Miliann Kang
The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal in Social Text by Tina M. Campt
Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde
A Feminist Theory of Refusal by Bonnie Honig
Louise Bourgeois by Louise Bourgeois, Robert Storr, Paulo Herkenhoff, and Allan Schwartzman
Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity by Jennifer Cooke
Feminist Subjectivities in Fiber Art and Craft: Shadows of affect by John Corso Esquivel
The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance by Anna Watkins Fisher
Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity by Margaret A. McLaren
Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures and Other Latina Longings by Juana Maria Rodriguez
Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric by madison moore
Raving by McKenzie Wark
A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation by Tan Hoang Nguyen
Pleasure Activism by adrienne maree brown
Can the Monster Speak? Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts by Paul B Preciado
Ka Honua Ola, 'Eli'eli Kau Mai / The Living Earth, Descend, Deepen the Revelation by Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele
Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism by Elizabeth A. Povinelli
Risk Work: Making Art and Guerrilla Tactics in Punitive America, 1967-1987 by Faye Raquel Gleisser

1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006), 6.

2 Anderson, 6.

3 Anderson, 7.

4 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Cornell University Press, 1974), 232.

5 Turner, 47+48

Photos by Cohort
Alice Zhao, Yishan Xin, Chenyang Nie



Beyond the White Cube, The Nail Art of Cyshimi and Keesha Clark

On November 18, 2023, we hosted a program featuring Keesha Clark, the nail artist and founder of Born Noir Nails. She offered a multifaceted experience, including a mini-lecture, a hands-on workshop, and a stimulating discussion. Clark not only shared insights into her professional journey and personal history but also delved into the fundamental aspects of the art of nail decoration. Through her presentation, participants gained a comprehensive understanding of the techniques and principles underly-ing this expressive form of selfcare and empowerment. As the program concluded, participants had the unique opportunity to apply their newfound knowledge by creating their own customized nail art on press-on nails provided for the occasion.

Overall, the program delivered intense experiences that were both pleasurable and meaningful. Interestingly, when the program was first proposed, members of the last year cohort challenged the idea that seriousness could be expressed through such an entertaining program. But why does programming have to be limited to lectures or panel discussions? Can it not be entertaining? Who says pleasure cannot coexist with an intellectual and socially-engaging aesthetic experience?

The atmosphere of a museum or gallery space can be intimidating, with its white, even walls and unobtrusive artificial lighting. Nowadays, many art institutions still rely upon the spatialized power dynamics of the

“white cube.” By keeping works of art in a kind of “aesthetic vacuum,” the disinterestedness implicit in the white cube model separates art from its social worlds, operations, and experiences. Therefore, one of the most important goals of this curatorial project is to subvert the white cube by queering the gallery, creating an intimate setting, and bringing in communities not usually encountered in such institutions. In our view, this nail program successfully achieved that. Participants openly discussed their preferences and artistic journeys, sitting close to each other, sharing tools, and painting nails at their own pace. They chose their rhinestones and decorations, transcending the structure of nail design as a service-oriented experience and questioning and redefining its aesthetic parameters. It became an event where participants experienced a sense of unexpected and vivid belonging–a physical and emotional space where they felt truly welcomed, not just tolerated, creating a safe environment for discussing complex issues. The enjoyable bonding throughout this program developed a communal belonging that allowed individuals to feel accepted without having to justify their existence in the institution.

We, as curators, have traditionally focused on providing visitors with information and facilitating expert discourse. However, we often ignore or invalidate the more personal and subjective ways in which visitors make meaning – through experiences, opinions, imaginations, memories, and fantasies. This nail program challenged this form of meaning-making and encouraged open-ended and thoroughly engaging learning experiences, where embodied sensationalized knowledge is created. Just as adults do not need to







resist playing, galleries and museums do not need to resist entertaining.

As part of the program, curators Yishan Xin and Linna Wang conducted emailed interviews with Keesha Clark and one of our participating artists, Cyshimi. Keesha and Cyshimi discussed nail art's roles in self-care, resistance, and challenging norms. They explored how nail art becomes a medium of self-expression, identity, or even empowerment. Their insights prompt us to elevate nail art as a legitimate art form beyond beautylish readers and reflect on its ability to highlight broader social issues. Here their remarks are presented as a constructed/imagined conversation.

Photos by Cohort
Alice Zhao, Yishan Xin, Chenyang Nie

Linna Wang (LW) To begin, could each of you share your journey as an artist and describe how you discovered your interest in nail art?

Cyshimi (C) I've always had a strong relationship with vanity since I was a teenager. From clothes, cosmetics and beauty YouTubers, all of that followed me along to construct my identity with a twist to get me outside of the norms. Since that time, I started to grow my natural nails really, really long. I found it incredible how our body could grow something naturally so fantastic, and mainly, how I felt with them. I felt more powerful and unique. I was also really drawn to how people would interact with me when they saw I had long nails, whole relationships would start from that. Be their reaction positive or negative, that estrangement was the starting point for some people to question some things inside themselves.

Keesha Clark (KC) Unbeknownst to me, my journey as an artist started as a small child. Like most children, I enjoyed participating in creative and artistic activities of all kinds, but I had a special connection to nail art and design. The matriarchs of my family, particularly my grandmother, mother, and aunt, took great pride in maintaining their natural nails. I fondly remember moments when I would be invited to paint and design their nails from time to time. Witnessing their meticulous care and artistic nail designs left an indelible mark on me. Little did I know, they each planted a seed that would grow into my very own nail cosmetic company decades later. For me, the act of doing nails has always transcended mere aesthetics; it's been a sanctuary of peace, a form of self-care, and a conduit for connection and fellowship.

Yishan Xin (YX) Nail art and nail artists are not traditionally featured in a gallery setting. Yet, through the programming and exhibited artwork of our show, *Wayward Refusals*, we have provided ample space for such media and for artists to showcase that nail art *is* art. Can you discuss why you chose this specific medium as your artistic practice? Do you consider it a canvas or even a sculptural form for artistic expression?

KC I believe a canvas is any place, space or circumstance where you can leave a mark, make an impact and be fully expressed. Whether you paint on paper, write in the sky, or draw in the dirt, as an artist there should be no bounds to the mediums you use to create. Nail art is ART! It is my art. I tell my story through this art form. It is where I draw my inspiration, channel my ancestors, practice mindfulness, resist limitations, and freely express myself. Just as any art form, it deserves to be recognized and appreciated. I am thankful that I had the opportunity to enter this gallery space and shed light on one of many underappreciated art forms.

C As a transdisciplinary artist, I identified how nails are a medium that navigates and reunites many concepts and media I have run into before. Nails carry the big baggage of identity, empowerment, and social issues, which are subjects that were always present in my work. It also combines sculpting and painting techniques to fit and live with bodies, which, in my research, turn them into a performative sculpture.

LW Many of your nail pieces have intricate details and possess a tactile quality that is quite compelling – I



Cyshimi
Treasure Knots, 2022
NFT

1 The postcard titled ‘Fingernails of a High-Class Chinaman’ features a color image of a hand with exceptionally long fingernails on all fingers except the index finger. Created during the early 20th century, it was part of a broader trade in orientalized images, specifically, cartes de visite, designed for Western audiences.

couldn’t help but want to touch the texture. Could you share insights into the inspiration behind one or two of your favorite works and the narrative or emotions you aim to convey through your creations? Since nails are relatively small, what is your process for translating abstract or complex concepts into these tangible and visually striking pieces?

C I try looking at references apart from nails: nature, extraordinary or common objects, and narratives are some of the things that inspire my work. One thing nail artists understand is how hard and time consuming it is to sculpt in miniature scales because it is much more intricate and requires a lot of attention to details. Usually, the whole set of sculptures can take days up to weeks to produce, from researching, sketching, testing materials, and finally producing the nail set itself.

In Treasure Knots (2022), the starting point was the desire to create a work directly connecting nails and heri-tage, both issues that are constant in my body of work. So, firstly what you see is that the nails sculptures are in the format of Chinese knots. In Chinese culture knots can represent good luck, longevity, and union which is basically a symbolic materialization of wishes and commitments. Similar in function to something like an amulet. The research on Chinese knots started as a consequence of a previous study on qipaos(traditional Chinese dresses), which contain these decorative knots in the buttons of the dresses, which was once an object of study for me, in a previous work called *1212 - Qipao Giveaway* (2020) which is a project enacted over twelve months that I give-away 12 qipao – these Chinese dresses – to twelve different people. Together we would intervene with silk stamps, all designed by me with a related theme. This was a form to discuss the fetishization of this object and also to gather the Chinese community here with its ancestry. It is from this project that these knots in the dresses started to get my attention. The nails in *Treasure Knots* were all sculpted with ceramics, and it is actually the heaviest nails that I have ever worn. They were also really fragile. I chose to do them with this material because of all the history of ceramic and porcelain in China. In the background you see a really iconic postcard called “Fingernails of a High Class Chinaman.”[1] In China, long nails were a symbol of status quo for the royalty, when empresses would wear long nails as it meant that they weren’t able to do manual labor. The fusing of these elements creates a piece with both antique and contemporary tones. The contrast of these things creates an essentially contemporary image and syncs different key references from distinct eras into a unique composition.

KC I tend to be experimental in my approach to developing and designing concepts for nails. On any given day, I am using trial and error to craft what turn out to be my best pieces. At the heart of my design process, I find inspiration (or it finds me), then I dedicate time to research and explore the details and complexities of this inspiring concept. I break it down and put it back together, as maybe an engineer would a piece of machinery, but reimagine it with elements that tell my story or highlight my journey as an artist. I am naturally drawn to painting highly detailed designs and I can spend hours and days on one look! Nail canvases may be small in comparison to other mediums, but with just a little imagination, you can transform some-

one's hands into a masterpiece!

YX Oftentimes, people steer clear of elaborate nail styles characterized by exaggerated forms or lengths, not simply out of personal taste but because these styles can stigmatize them. The styles of nails mark people not only as beautiful or ugly, but also as qualified or unemployable in the workforce. Having long nails is not a sign of ideological efficiency. When determining what kinds of nails constitute "beauty", people are required to navigate different standards – those of their own communities, or those of particular institutions, such as the family and the workplace. Can you share your thoughts on how the larger workings of society play out in such minor choices like selecting nail styles? In what ways are people *nailed* to certain social positions and structures? And how do the nails you create construct a different body – one that aligns with its own will and whims?

C Not only my work, but my life has been about that. I didn't choose nails out of nowhere, it's very personal and it comes from an internal and external fight to stay true to myself. I never felt like I fit in the beauty standards especially as an Asian kid growing up in Brazil. There's a hygienic and polished idea of beauty that I couldn't fit into, and my nails are loud about that. It is the way I find to express such an early and primary discomfort towards that. I don't necessarily pride myself on saying that nails are such a resistance symbol throughout history, I don't wish that many people had to suffer to be themselves, but I do have hope for the future and that it's changing little by little. I not only see people shifting the idea of what type of nails are appropriate for work but also questioning their own basic idea of what institutions like work and family are.

KC In mainstream culture, longer, vibrant, and intricately designed nails have often been unfairly labeled as inferior and substandard. These societal norms not only permeate various aspects of culture but also suppress the artistic expression of community members. For marginalized groups, the pressure to conform to mainstream ideals extends to personal choices, even down to the way we adorn our nails.

As a press-on nail designer advocating for creative self-expression, one of my significant challenges is navigating the widespread preference for "practical" solutions that adhere to workplace standards. Many professional environments discourage individuality in nail aesthetics, some even enforcing strict policies in their dress codes. Unfortunately, the outlook for change in these spaces seems bleak. However, there is optimism on the horizon. The surge in popularity of DIY nails and press-on alternatives offers a glimmer of hope. People are increasingly resisting the constraints imposed by these traditional structures. The beauty of press-on nails lies in the freedom they provide for self-expression, allowing individuals to dictate their terms, whether it's during leisurely weekends or as a bold statement in the workplace. As the popularity of these flexible alternatives grows, there's potential for a shift in the way society perceives and embraces individuality, even in the most professional settings.

YX Bodily self-care, as a practice that privileges the surface, has been historically devalued as superficial. The care for the body is considered a waste of resources that could be better focused on seemingly more important and profound concerns of the mind and the heart – the West's privileged sites of

ontological being. Do you believe nail care is necessary, and why do you think it is important for people to engage in this form of self-care?

KC Absolutely! Nail care is as necessary as caring for any other part of our being. In my perspective, tending to our nails represents a profound form of self-care, emphasizing a deliberate commitment to our holistic wellness. Our hands do everything for us, but we too often do very little for them, in terms of care and adornment. Regardless of gender identity, age, or socioeconomic background, prioritizing the well-being of our natural nails should be an essential component of everyone's self-care regimen. By dedicating time and care to this seemingly small part of ourselves, we symbolize a conscious effort toward nurturing our overall health and balance.

C I believe that taking time for artistic practices like fashion, makeup and nails is personally a way to feel connected and present with my body and my physical form. It can be similar to a magic ritual that puts you in an acknowledgment state of who you are. When I dress up, put makeup on and put my nails, that's the way that I feel mostly me, myself. And that is self-care, because when you're comfortable with what you wear and how you present yourself, you're comfortable with the mind. Dominant culture creates a fixed concept in the common sense that nails are tied to vulgarity and dirtiness, the same way that dominant culture is almost always against any subversive style. Or when they attribute anything that is considered feminine like fashion/makeup/nails as something superficial and dumb, wanting to hinder us to express ourselves in alternative ways based on gender bias. Those are the kinds of thinking that I believe we have to change and transform.

LW Nail culture has its own set of subcultures and communities. How do you engage with the nail art community? How have these interactions influenced your growth as an artist?

C My nail community is basically on the internet. When I started, I didn't know any manicurists, the people who really taught me were the nail artists from YouTube/TikTok. The nail movement as we know it only exists because of the internet, and specifically social media, which has been shifting the idea of what a nail artist is. People started seeing nails as a new artistic medium that anyone can explore, and you don't necessarily need to be or to understand so much about manicures, or to be part of a beauty salon. Nowadays, you just need the desire to create something new and nails can be seen as any other medium that artists can choose. This changes the nail game, because when you bring people outside the field, outside of the media and that are not so afraid of the existing rules, I guess that that's where you really find a new vision.

KC Since the dawn of Born Noir, I've been purposeful in fostering connections with fellow artists and technicians within the nail industry. Entering this realm humbly amid the pandemic, I've gained invaluable insights from seasoned individuals dedicated to perfecting this craft. Born Noir is actively building its own community of nail artists, showcasing the talents of creative minds in the LA/LB areas. Within this community, we cultivate spaces for camaraderie, exchanging knowledge, honing

skills, and collectively elevating our artistic capabilities.

YX Nail work is gendered in that it primarily involves women as both service providers and customers. It centers on the construction of feminine beauty, situates itself in feminized semi-private spaces, and involves gendered work practices–specifically, the performance of emotional and body labor between women. However, Cyshimi, when I look at your nail art, I don't sense elegance or chic; instead, I feel an indestructible power and resistance. Keesha, you explicitly mentioned in the mission statement of your company that you believe nail art is genderless. Therefore, I am interested in both of your opinions on these gendered self-presentations and whether your nail art functions as extensions or even subversions of normative determinations of acceptable femininity.

C I don't see my nails being limited to any gender; however we can't deny the relation between nails and femininity. I not only can't but I also don't want to. On the contrary, it's important to recognize and destigmatize the negative idea around femininity through nails. As I mentioned before, femininity is often considered superficial and something "less". It's important to discuss nail history and the relation of nails with society and how much it was and is a representative of resistance for women and especially POC women. However, it's also about thinking how nails can be a tool of expression for so many trans identities and how it can even transcend gender binaries too.

KC Born Noir's nail work is rooted in the ethos of unapologetic self-expression. Building unique connections with each client, we delve into their personal interests and deepest aspirations, striving to comprehend how our designs can truly resonate. We celebrate the complexities of identity and craft pieces that transcend gender norms and expectations. Our goal is to break barriers and question established notions of gender by showcasing individuals from all gender identities actively participating in nail care and artistry. At Born Noir, we believe in celebrating the diverse spectrum of identity through our unique and boundary-pushing nail designs.

LW Innovation always involves experimentation. Are there specific experimental projects you have in mind for the future, and how do you plan to balance creativity with market demand?

KC I am, currently, in the process of an experimental project of developing a platform that fosters collaboration among nail artists, providing them with a space to connect, build community, and gain exposure while also seizing income-earning opportunities. Our innovative collective is dedicated to showcasing the artistic brilliance of nail artists and technicians, navigating the delicate equilibrium between creativity and market demand. Balancing the demands of the market with the boundless realms of creativity is an ongoing challenge. However, the beauty of art and the act of creation lies in the limitless opportunities it presents - the sky is not the limit, and possibilities are endless.

C I'm not sure I have a plan for it yet, and this is definitely an issue every artist has to deal with, but to begin with, it's about really hearing out yourself and following your wishes and trying to understand what you really



want despite all the external voices. I guess I also try to enjoy the good part that this creativity x market demand relation has, that is receiving new challenges and growing along with them. I'm very lucky that most of the projects I'm part of have a lot of creative freedom too.

Cyshimi
Deepest Dive, 2022
NFT

Curators

Ashley Ascencio (she/her)

Ashley is an MA student in the curatorial practices and the public sphere program at USC. She comes to this program with a strong background in anthropology. Ashley holds a bachelor's degree as well as a master's degree in cultural anthropology from California State University, Los Angeles and a master's degree in visual anthropology from USC. Her interests lie in repatriating Indigenous artifacts and the tension within the dialogue regarding decolonization. Ashley's future plan is to curate exhibitions at a cultural institution in collaboration with the Indigenous Peoples that are being represented in a concerted effort to embody their culture in a meaningful and respectful way.

Lisa Nie (she/her)

Chenyang Nie, originally from Zhejiang, China, nurtured a profound passion for art from a young age. This led her to Parsons School of Design in 2018, where she explored Fashion Design, refining her craft and gaining insights from industry experts. Transitioning seamlessly from fashion to art, Chenyang focused on apparel exhibitions and feminist themes. Her internship at Tank Shanghai in 2021 was pivotal, enriching her experience in curating exhibitions and events. Currently pursuing a Master's in Curatorial Practice at USC, Chenyang's journey includes diverse roles in gallery operations and art foundation assistance, showcasing her talents in event planning, content creation, research, and graphic design. With an unwavering commitment to the arts, Chenyang Nie forges ahead as a dynamic presence in the creative realm.

Hattie Schultz (she/her)

Hattie Schultz (she/her) is a curator and writer based in Los Angeles. Before pursuing a Masters degree in Curatorial Practices and the Public Sphere from the University of Southern California, she earned her Bachelor's degree in Art History with a minor in Gender Studies from Whittier College in 2020. Interested in the intersections of art, psychology, and literature, Hattie's academic studies center feminist and queer history and theory, institutional critique, and affect theory. She is currently writing her Master's Thesis, titled *Subverting Madness: On Translating the Mental Illness Memoir into a Curatorial Practice*. She hopes to evoke empathy through her creative practices, and calls for an immediate ceasefire in the bombing of Gaza.

Linna Wang (she/her)

Linna Wang is a multi-media artist, photographer and curator based in Shanghai, Los Angeles and San Francisco. She is currently working on MA in Curatorial Practices and the Public Sphere from the University of Southern California. Linna's curatorial endeavors are rooted in her scholarly interest in restructuring the interplay between artists, curators, and art exhibitions, drawing insights from diverse cultural paradigms. Her recent scholarly focus has gravitated towards investigating the conception and application of irreplaceable tokens (NFTs) in the preservation and dissemination of artistic heritage, along with the discourse surrounding intellectual property rights within the domain of digital museums.

Yishan Xin (she/her)

Yishan Xin is a curator based in Los Angeles and Shanghai. She received a BASc in Arts and Sciences and an MA in Art Education, Culture, and Practice from University College London. Before undertaking her second master's degree in Curatorial Practices and the Public Sphere from the University of Southern California, she served as an assistant curator at Long Museum Shanghai, home to China's largest private collection. Between 2020 and 2022, she helped curate a number of exhibitions, including *Loie Hollowell: Recalibrate* (2021), *Mary Corse: Painting with Light* (2021), and *Pat Steir* (2021). She also worked with guest curators Massimiliano Gioni on American artist George Condo's first major retrospective in Asia and Iwona Blazwick on Long Museum's 10th Anniversary Exhibition. Yishan is passionate about unlocking alternative museum models, especially the potential of private museums in China. Her research currently centers on socially engaged and participatory art, museum accessibility, emancipation of spectators, and art as an experience.

Darlene Zhang (she/her)

Hang Zhang, originally from Xi'an, China, currently is an MA Student in the program for Curatorial Practice and the Public Sphere at the University of Southern California (USC). Her academic journey began with a Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art from Franklin & Marshall College, where a focus was placed on graphic and spatial design. This foundational education sparked a profound interest in the dynamics of spatial design, specifically the intricate relationships between spaces, individuals, and objects, and the stories that emerge from these interactions. Her passion for curatorial studies is further influenced by practical experience gained through an internship at the Italy-China Foundation in Beijing. In this role, serving as an assistant curator, she contributed to planning exhibitions and was involved in the compilation of art-related publications. Her recent research, titled *Art Collaborations in Fashion Brand Space*, investigates the development and societal impacts of integrating contemporary art with fashion brands in China.

Alice Zhao (she/her)

Alice is a scholar and curator based in Los Angeles. She is a second-year M.A. candidate in Curatorial Practices at USC Roski completing a Graduate Certificate in Performance Studies, and she earned her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. With an emphasis on merging theory with practice, her scholarly interest focuses on not only bringing visibility to the iridescence of queer of color lives, but foregrounding the vibrant practices these communities devise to live in more emotionally embodied ways. Alice is particularly interested in femmes of color's critical use of aesthetics, fashion, and gestures in the every day as practices of survival and world-making. She is working on her M.A. thesis on burlesques by the South Korean adoptee Kayla Tange (Coco Ono), which she hopes to expand into a larger project on the unruly ways femme Asian lives can take shape. Alice enjoys the liminal communities she finds at raves, punk shows, and goth parties in LA. She will begin a PhD degree in Modern Culture and Media at Brown University in Fall 2024.

Artists

Lucy Black (she/her)
Born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, Lucy Black is a Los Angeles-based artist who graduated with a BFA from Paris College of Art in 2020. She works across a range of mediums including collage, photography, performance, and soft sculpture. “My work is highly multidisciplinary, using whatever materials I can get my hands on. All of my work includes a sense of humor, irony, and absurdity to highlight the bizarre and heavy feeling of dissociation. I try to capture the imagery and movement that is comfortably familiar but invokes the unsettling yet unavoidable feeling that something is in fact off.”

Cyshimi (she/they)
Cyshimi is a Chinese and Taiwanese Brazilian artist based in São Paulo who explores issues of ancestry, identity, beauty, and body through nail art. Describing nails as “Performative Sculptures,” Cyshimi challenges hegemonic beauty standards, injecting a dynamic essence into the traditional and polished notion of beauty. At the same time their nail sculptures are surreal, they are also about real identities and bodies reimagining the self. Their work shows how nails are a symbol of resistance and empowerment. For Cyshimi, every nail encapsulates a new world—a fusion of shapes, colors, and textures that, when brought together, weave narratives that transcend mere aesthetics.

Katinka Huang (she/her)
Katinka Huang (b. 1998, Shanghai, China) is an artist based in New York City. Katinka’s dual-cultured upbringing, navigating between the East and the West within a female-centric environment, ignited her interest in exploring the complexity of the female psyche. She delves into the misconceptions surrounding the female body and the ongoing sensationalization of women, both historically and in the present. Embracing absurdism, Katinka captures raw and turbulent emotional states through her depictions of the female figure. Her work delves into the differences in the ideologies of femininity between the East and the West, portraying women in satirical manners with animalistic bodies. In her paintings, the female body serves as a site of rebellion, challenging the ‘sophisticated’ portrayals of women across cultures.

Young Joon Kwak (they/she)
Young Joon Kwak (b. 1984, Queens, New York; lives and works in Los Angeles) received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007, an MA from the University of Chicago in 2010, and an MFA from the University of Southern California in 2014. Their sculptures, performances, and community-based collaborations generate new and embodied forms of queer and trans kinship and explore the transitioning nature of all bodies. They are the founder of Mutant Salon and lead performer in the electronic-dance-noise band Xina Xurner. Their work has been shown in solo exhibitions at Arko Art

Center, Seoul (2022); Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles (2021); Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles (2021, 2017, 2016, 2014); Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (2018); and Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada (2018). Group exhibitions and performances include *Made in L.A. 2023: Acts of Living*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2023); Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK (2023); MSU Broad Art Museum, Lansing, MI (2023); Hauser & Wirth, New York (2021).

Julia Mata (she/they)
Julia Mata is a comics writer and illustrator from Southern California with familial roots in Central America and the Eastern European Jewish Pale of Settlement. In the illustrations and comics she creates, she centers equity, representation of women of color, and nuanced narratives with space for joy, beauty, and emotional growth. She works predominantly in comics, books, and DIY publications as both an art form and an ethos, aiming for easily distributable access to her work as print media in non-art spaces.

Coyote Park (he/they/she)
Coyote Park is a Korean American and Indigenous (Native to Northern California, family is enrolled Karuk/Yurok) artist from O'ahu. Park was raised in Mililani and Liliha and focuses their work on land and body relationships, as well as folktales. Park went to school at Parsons in New York City then lived in California, meanwhile being a working artist juggling painting, photography, filmmaking, and teaching. Park has taught at Stanford, Dartmouth, CSULB, USC, Rutgers, and more. Park's work pushes past ongoing colonial struggles, meanwhile recognizing the aftermath of colonial settler intervention and their religious upbringing. Park is interested in their work highlighting diasporic existences and healing from their own strife as a trans person.

RUTH (she/they)
RUTH is an artist and Georgia-born suburbanite living in the city of Los Angeles. They explore connection, identity, family, the mundane and suburbalism through various mediums such as video, performance, collage, painting, puppetry and whatever else the inner jelly calls for. Their artwork has been shown at These Days gallery and Permanent Storage Projects, and they received recognition by Indie It Press, placing 3rd in their Applaud Art Contest.

Toni Smalls (they/them)
Toni Smalls was born in The Bronx, New York. They began writing poetry in middle school to cope with trauma - publishing a poem in the Anthology of Poetry By Young Americans. In highschool, then began to pair written words with visuals. Finding passion for photography, they studied photo and writing at FIT.

They began to show work in multiple group exhibitions - including a group show on billboards in California, and another through LinkNYC kiosks. They met their idol, Alex Prager. They shot Brigette Lundy-Paine for *Out100*. They performed spoken word at multiple events. Before graduating, they embarked on project *Under Inner Core* - a visual poetry EP fully written and filmed by them. That work was noticed by a creative director - leading them to art direct for a Facebook campaign in 2021.

Toni has been teetering a tightrope between being a fine artist and art director in the campaign world. Recently having shown 7 pieces of work in *Wayward Refusals* - Toni starts to grapple with being a Black and Queer radicalist working under the strain of capitalism. Their newest image set, *Worker Bee*, continues to explore these themes of working for an other-serving system. Toni is now working on a currently untitled poetry book and video pieces that deconstruct advertising narratives into visual and poetic decompositions.

Peidi Zhang (she/her)
Peidi Zhang is a Los Angeles-based photographer, born and raised in China. Her work is rooted in her multilingual upbringing and dual cultural experiences as an Asian in America, inspired by her community, cross-generational youth culture, and marginalized contexts. She creates parallel worlds through her photographs, blurring the line between languages and identities, and expanding the boundaries of perception beyond visual norms. Peidi is visualized as a theoretical 'poem-lab' built within a surreal, timeless place, presenting ideas and abstractions that lift us from reality while simultaneously reflecting upon it.

Peidi often utilizes lighting control techniques and incorporates humor, absurdity, and a dreamcore style sensibility. She guides models into characters, emphasizing storytelling through dreamy, emotionally intense colors, unique exposures, compositions, and details.

In her work, Peidi has always appreciated a diversity of people, respected their unique stories, and found ways to emotionally connect and collaborate with them. As an artist, she reflects, researches, and uncovers sincerity. She finds novelty in the mundane, explores pain with humor, and accesses vulnerability. She creates alternative ways to problem-solve through the lens of creativity and curiosity, aiming for her work to connect with all walks of life, reflect mutual experiences, and inspire deeper conversations.

Her visual work has been featured in *Vogue Italia*, *ELLE USA*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and more.

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